



Office of the President

“Determined, Engaged Optimism,” Inaugural, October 2015

October 1, 2015

Good morning students, faculty, staff, trustees, alumni, presidents emeriti and their families, delegates, citizens of the town of Middlebury, of Vermont, of New England, citizens of Monterey, of our nation, and of the world. We are delighted that you are here. I am particularly moved that you have come to celebrate on this joyful day the next chapter in Middlebury’s extraordinary history. Many of you have come a long way, from overseas and from states a great distance from Vermont. Others of you have made an extra special effort to get here. Let me pause now to tell you that there is a Middlebury tradition of honoring one particular person who always makes a special effort to get to Middlebury events, and I would like to follow it now. I want to acknowledge our Middlebury neighbor and friend, Butch Varno. There is a tradition where a Middlebury athletic team picks Butch up for events, and I’m delighted to say Butch has been picked up today by the basketball team to join us for this event. Butch, and his team, are you out there? Let me extend a special welcome to you and to all people who have made the effort to be with us today.

In the last three months, my husband Shalom and I have received a warm welcome that we have come to recognize as typical of you. Your welcome inspires me to continue our collective work of deepening our Middlebury traditions, as well as expanding Middlebury’s horizons.

You have greeted us with new ideas, with new arguments, with a sense of pride in this place and a sense of determined, engaged optimism about all that we can do together.

That determined, engaged optimism is at the heart of who Middlebury is. People have remarked how challenging their courses are. Others are concerned about the effortless perfection that so

many elite colleges seem to demand. And some have spoken of their disappointment in some decision the institution has made. But every single person I have met has simultaneously declared his or her great love of this place and its people.

Why do we love it so? I think there are many answers to this question. As an outsider who has now chosen to be among you, I have the privilege of telling you your own stories in a different way.

Allow me today to describe that particular collective genius that has helped Middlebury endure—and in more recent decades thrive—for 215 years and has helped it to get to this particular moment on this wonderful fall morning, with all of us gathered to contemplate the next moments of transformation and hope. Allow me also to describe for us a future.

Let me begin by turning to the mountains. I have learned from you all that it is helpful to do so. At Middlebury we live the words of poet Heather McHugh, who wrote: “If you live on the edge of an enormous mountain or an enormous body of water, it’s harder to think of yourself as being so important. That seems useful to me, spiritually.”

There is a tradition that I just learned about one recent September evening. The sun was vanishing in one of those sunsets that stops us in our tracks and wakes us up, even as our minds and hearts move toward the night. I have learned that when these sunsets happen one of the athletic coaches stops the action and says, “OK, everyone needs to stop for a mountain moment.” And the players stop to appreciate the moment.

But there is even more to these mountains than contemplation. A trustee with whom I had a long dinner last spring told me, “When I was a student, and I was in the middle of working on a big philosophical problem, my brain would be exploding and I wasn’t sure I could think it through. And then I would walk outside of class, and I would look up and there would be the mountains. And somehow the problem seemed smaller with the mountains there, and yet also even more important at the same time. And I somehow thought that the mountains could help me solve the problem.”

These mountains call all of us to be bigger in our aspirations and yet also to be smaller, linked to a larger cause. Middlebury’s mountains give us a sense of place that is also a sense of community.

The mountains help us find our place in the world, and even if we don't find it immediately, we have a deep and abiding trust that we will. This is the strength of the hills.

And McHugh also reminds us that the ocean has the same effect. Now, with our campus in Monterey, we have both. In my several visits to Monterey I have already met students wandering down by the harbor, when I myself wandered there, in need of perspective and a sense of the larger picture.

That trustee dinner was also inspiring because we had a series of intense discussions about what made Middlebury special. And even though we talked about many wonderful educational traits that other liberal arts institutions can and should also claim, there was still that remainder that made Middlebury distinct from others: Is it the Adirondacks and the Greens? Is it our heritage of open-mindedness? Is it the aspirations that we have had all along, particularly the ones that have had such a lasting impact, like the Language Schools, Bread Loaf, and the Schools Abroad? Is it our capacity to create a certain kind of exuberance? Our love of and care for languages and writing and sciences and society and arts and athletics all at the same time? Is it because we all seem to love dogs?

I think it is all these things, and perhaps one thing more—our capacity to argue and be resilient in those arguments. As I have begun to learn about Middlebury's history, I see we have argued well. Not all of our arguments have been pretty, and many of them have been petty, or even destructive. But when we have gotten those arguments right, we have done so in a committed and passionate and constructive way.

And so allow me to describe a future. Here is my thought for you, today, and in the years to come: I challenge us to have more and better arguments, with greater respect, stronger resilience, and deeper wisdom.

The Jewish tradition has a phrase: "argument for the sake of heaven." This is an argument worth having, where the goal is not victory, nor even the proof of one's own intelligence. Rather, the goal has been a deeper truth for the common good. It is an argument where one wants the other side to have better arguments, because all arguments are in service of the common good. We want to learn from the better arguments, so that we can create a better and more capacious home for all of us to dwell in. These are the arguments worth having.

What is more, the results of those arguments are not fleeting, but deep and enduring, and they help human beings to thrive. There may be times when we cannot discern whether an argument will result in an enduring good. And the outcome of the debate may not even be what we expected or hoped for. But we can still conduct ourselves in such a way that we hope for such a lasting result. In having these arguments, we do not become alienated from each other because one side has lost and another side has won, or because one side has proven itself more intelligent and sophisticated. Rather, in having these arguments, we become even more committed to each other.

I once visited a Tibetan monastery in Dharamsala, India, where I spoke with an elderly monk who had lost his oldest friend. The monk told me that he mourned the loss of his friend because he was the most vituperative and dynamic debate partner he ever had. “We had the most passionate arguments possible. And whenever he got the better of me and our elders judged him victorious, I would make him dinner and we would laugh and try to figure out the next topic that we would argue about.” This is a contemporary story, but it resonates with many periods of human history as well. In ancient India, when one has been vanquished in an argument, one brings the victor firewood and water as a way of honoring, nourishing, and warming the winner. It is a way of taking care of the person whose wisdom we now honor and respect.

Every single part of Middlebury has become the illustrious community it is through impassioned argument. Let me tell you this morning some stories about how we have been arguing all along.

Did you know, for example, that in the early 19th century, Middlebury townspeople argued about whether to build the campus on the east or the west side of Otter Creek? Or that the idea of a college in Middlebury was born in rivalrous competition for government funding with the citizens of Burlington, who wanted to be first to create an institution of higher learning—the University of Vermont? (I am delighted to note I learned, from my new friend Tom Sullivan, UVM’s president, that no such rivalry currently exists or might possibly be rekindled.) Or that the early leaders debated whether to send an illustrious and beloved faculty member to get further scientific training in Europe, in one of the earliest Middlebury instances of study abroad? (Only that time the student was also a professor.) Did you know that Middlebury’s beloved second president, Henry Davis, turned down offers from Yale and Trinity colleges to be their president, in order to stay at Middlebury to continue a debate about its larger educational goals?

We've always been having arguments about big themes. For example, we once debated about religion. Throughout the first decades of its history, Middlebury's administrators, faculty, students, and townspeople survived several heated controversies about whether the nature of the College was to be religious—guided by the principles of the great religious revivals sweeping America—or secular and guided by the civic principles of the business people who founded it as “the town's college.” At one point during those debates, enrollment dropped from 168 to 46, and all the faculty and President Bates resigned. It took President Labaree from 1840–66 to keep us alive, and until 1880, with the hiring of President Hamlin, to fully recover.

We've also been debating governance for centuries. In 1879, there was a very tough conversation about student governance. The entire student body voted to suspend itself in protest of a popular student's dismissal. The administration suspended the students back in retaliation, except that the students didn't care because they had already suspended themselves. It took a week of negotiations for both sides to agree to terms to end the revolt.

And we've been debating the lives of men and women on this campus for an equally long time. There are many examples beyond the famous one, where Emma Willard set up her school across from Middlebury's campus because the College was not yet prepared to admit young women.

There was even a debate about whether the trustees really meant to admit women as students, or just grant them privileges. It was only after May Belle Chellis finished her course work at the top of her class three years later that they decided they must have meant to admit them after all.

And, in 1942–43, during the height of World War Two, the College lost most of its male students. It was only when President Stratton secured the V-12 Officer Training Program at Middlebury in 1943 that the campus became balanced again with male and female students.

We argued about men and women again in heated controversies of the '60s, when students advocated for relaxed curfews and allowing women in men's dorms without chaperones. It sounds quaint now, but it sure wasn't then.

And in the early '70s Middlebury debated its response to Kent State student deaths, when classes were suspended in order to, as one publication put it, pursue a “re-examination of our collective and individual directions and purposes.”

In addition to the College, the founding of our schools, too, were marked by many arguments that, while difficult at the time, led to lasting change. The Bread Loaf Writers' Conference is a compelling example. As David Bain and Michael Collier told me, the first five years of the Writers' Conference, from 1926–1931, were colored by a mutual personal dislike between the New York book editor John Farrar, the first conference director, and Robert Frost, by then a celebrated Pulitzer-winning poet. Farrar created the conference model of published writers helping the unpublished in their paths, whether toward publication or just a slightly higher competence, and included not only working writers, but book and magazine editors and literary agents as faculty and guest lecturers. Frost gladly lectured and read at the new entity—the nation's first writers' conference. But after several sessions Frost began to call the conference “The Two-Week Manuscript Sales Fair”—his way of complaining that Farrar was favoring commercialism over art. For several years, the two admittedly thin-skinned literary figures catalogued their perceived bruises from remarks both public and private. Both left Bread Loaf to pursue other projects. By then the controversy had risen into the literary and critical columns.

The Bread Loaf solution to the art versus commerce controversy eventually came in 1932 with the naming of the third director of the conference, Theodore Morrison. As a published poet and teacher, “Morrison had his feet in both camps of art and commerce. He also possessed immense diplomacy, so lacking in both Frost and Farrar. He succeeded brilliantly in combining the two missions, brokered a civil return for the two combatants, and launched what became an ambitious, far-reaching fellowship program that would recognize emerging writers and smooth their way into the literary world.”

There also were important debates about language and policy in the history of the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey. Dean Jeff Dayton-Johnson told me recently that in 1988, students in the policy and business programs were frustrated because the existing traditional foreign language offerings were not relevant to their degree programs. A major turning point came with the decision that year to submit a grant proposal to the Pew Foundation that facilitated the complete overhaul of the foreign language curriculum into a content-based format. The grant enabled language faculty to collaborate with policy and business faculty in developing a new approach to the curriculum that exists today.

Our environmental studies program, too, faced internal opposition when it was formed 50 years ago this year. And for years to follow, there was a sense of competition between geology and

environmental studies. It took a long series of good negotiated conversations to create a healthy complementarity, and today, thankfully, both departments are thriving. As Nan Jenks-Jay told me, the elements that have helped environmental studies thrive and grow are perseverance and inclusion. This, surely, was an argument for the sake of heaven.

And lest you think there is a school at Middlebury that is controversy free, let me assure you that there is not. The Language Schools have debated over the years as to which language to adopt next, and whether one follows a moral or a market argument for adding that language. The Schools Abroad have argued in past decades about how their directors are appointed, and how they connect back to the Middlebury campus. And there were probably many arguments that have woven the fabric of who we are today that did not make it into the archives, but whose losers and winners have created the educational ethos and principles we hold so dear in 2015.

So you might be thinking now about how your own debates about Middlebury's future will look when viewed by future Middlebury citizens 100 years from now when, perhaps, Middlebury will be inaugurating its 27th president. We should all be thinking that way, both for the sake of humor as well as for the chance to discern whether our current arguments are ones that will result in lasting change for the good. Whether they are arguments for the sake of heaven.

I hope we are all thinking about that, because I believe that Middlebury's collective genius of warmth, optimism, rigor, and compassion can make us some of the best arguers in higher education—arguers who can think together with deeper respect, stronger resilience, and greater wisdom.

Here are more thoughts on a vision for our future. Let me name the things I hope we argue about in our years together:

I hope in the future we can create real priorities, and argue productively as we clearly state what makes us excellent, and identify the places where Middlebury can particularly lead and distinguish itself even further.

To take a first example: We say we are global. But we said that 50 years ago and then it was unusual. Now everyone in higher education is saying it. So today, can Middlebury lead again, in what I call a literate globalism, one that takes time and effort and languages and cultural knowledge to achieve?

Can we ask ourselves whether such literate globalism is truly baked into our courses of study? Are we global in our thinking about math? About psychology? About the ancient world? How do those definitions of global differ in each case?

Second, I hope we can argue about sustainability and the environment in a way that helps us to be creative and multiple in our responses. We will be one of the first institutions in higher education to be carbon neutral. For all of us that is to be celebrated. But for some that will be old news. Are we moving together to identify and move forward with the next steps? There are new forms of alternative energy, green investments, ways of holding companies and ourselves accountable for conservation and lowering our carbon footprint. Are we moving together in a way that is constructive and creative, even if we occasionally disappoint one another by not moving fast enough or radically enough or in all the right directions?

Third, I hope we can argue about how we live together in a newly diverse Middlebury. Here, with the help of our staff at our newly created Anderson Freeman Resource Center, we need to listen to students as they live and describe their experiences. Theirs is an experience of diversity that older generations did not live through. We need to honor this new experience and create structures to reflect the powerful fact that diversity and excellence in higher education go hand in hand. One creates the other. And most importantly, we must find ways to live more wisely with the knowledge that diversity is not a problem to be solved. Rather, diversity is an everyday ethic to be cultivated, made richer and more vibrant.

Fourth, I hope we can debate, in new ways, the relationship of our multiple identities as human beings. Can we find a way to think about intellectual, social, gender, economic, sexual, artistic, religious, athletic, bodily, and so many other identities, both our own and others, in new ways? Could we imagine ourselves as members of intersecting communities, all of which have something to contribute to the whole? Can we put aside some of the privileges of one of our identities in order to understand, empathize with, and work alongside of others that do not share that privilege? And here's the biggest challenge: Can we do that even as, at the very same moment, we ourselves might be feeling falsely accused or unjustly stereotyped?

Fifth, I hope we can argue about the nature of our newly complex Middlebury world. We are no longer a single unit, and we are constantly grappling with how plural or singular we might become. Research about us suggests that we like and are identified with our individual Middlebury units:

the College, Bread Loaf, Monterey, the Schools Abroad, the Language Schools, etc. And I would encourage this identification as a good thing. At the same time, from our various corners, we now are witnessing the creation of an ecosystem of relationships across schools and programs. It would be a mistake to force a false integration. It would equally be a mistake not to recognize places where collaboration across our schools could result in mutual benefit. Like all great ecosystems, species interdependence and species differentiation go hand in hand.

We will be launching a Middlebury-wide conversation in the spring—the first institution-wide discussion we’ve ever had on the topic of our intellectual direction—that will focus on who we are and where we want to go. The data we collect from this effort will form the basis of our strategic plan. Let me be clear: it would be unwise, indeed a risk factor, for us to become a university. And yet we are no longer only a college, even as the liberal arts glimmers and shines at the center of everything we do. We are leading in an as-yet undefined third space—and our challenge is to discover the features of that third space even as we live it.

Part of that complexity is not only our relationship with other units and campuses far away from us, but with those close by—the town of Middlebury and the state of Vermont. You heard me refer to the “town’s college” earlier. Indeed, if it were not for all of the townspeople who met to determine the early school buildings, the early presidents, the faculty who held the College together when there was no president—if it were not for these local stewards of that dream, there would be no Middlebury. Our history suggests that we are truly the town’s college, and that we are also a community that is the mirror of the Vermont traditions of civic engagement and local democracy. We should think together about the shape of the commitment Middlebury has to its local and state communities in 2015, and what rich, long-lasting partnerships between college and town can be born from that knowledge.

So in all these ways I challenge us to have more and better arguments, with greater respect, stronger resilience, and deeper wisdom. Exemplary sustainability. Leadership in global literacy. The everyday ethic of diversity. An exploration of privilege and identity. A newly complex and vibrant institutional life.

And finally let me describe the conditions of our arguments for the sake of heaven—conditions about which we should have no argument: greater respect, stronger resilience, and deeper

wisdom. All three of these things will help our arguments become arguments for the sake of heaven.

Greater respect does not mean that we will never be disrespected nor disrespect others. We will all have both experiences, sometimes unexpected and unintentional. Just last week I inadvertently disrespected a group of students by moving too fast in support of their efforts. But respect is about what the Buddhist tradition calls right effort. Respect is the effort to imagine, before we speak or act, what it would be like to be on the receiving side of our speech or action.

And what is stronger resilience? Resilience is a word whose meaning we think we know, but we may need to think more deeply about. Resilience can mean to return to health after an injury or period of hardship. The scientific meaning of resilience involves an object being restored to its original shape after it has been bent or distorted. In everyday language, it can also mean an object that has adopted a new shape, but stronger than before.

In a newly complex Middlebury, we embrace resilience—the capacity to develop a respectful dignified response when we are injured, and the strength to return to shape. By resilience we do not mean “to power on” or “to power through” at all costs. Rather, resilience is about making the space to reflect and recover. Our students are helping lead in this effort, and we as a community should join them in developing the programs and places where resilience can grow.

And what is wisdom? Middlebury wisdom means the capacity to take the long view, understanding the breadth and depth of our world even as we passionately pursue a single cause. We are not wise if, as Middlebury educators and educated citizens, our only focus is the accumulation of profit and not the creation of value. We are not wise if we do not take time to contemplate the implications of an idea and its impact on the world. Wisdom is knowledge in context.

Exemplary sustainability. Leadership in global literacy. An everyday ethic of diversity. An exploration of privilege and identity. A newly complex and vibrant institutional life.

Here is my dream for us: What if Middlebury became a place where we had our best arguments about these aspirations? What if our arguments at Middlebury created affection and devotion between opponents, united in the service of the common good? What if at Middlebury we were like Tibetan monks, where we mourned the loss of our debate partners because we no longer had

their help on the path to wisdom? What if through our arguments we became the place the world turned to, as a model of public engagement and respect?

I believe in our unique combination of warmth and optimism and compassion and rigor—we have the disposition, and the collective genius, to become that place. I believe we can become the place known to have arguments for the sake of heaven.

I believe we can do this with the exhortation and help of the mountains all around us, and now too our ocean at Monterey. These mountains will help us find our place in the world, even as we wander in our deliberations. This is the strength of the hills.

And, as a way of beginning on this path, I further invite us to argue about all of the points I have made here today, and do so with respect, resilience, and wisdom.

Since my arrival we have already started on these arguments for the sake of heaven, or Middlebury—whichever comes first in your mind. I can't wait to continue them in the years ahead. Those are my dreams for us, and they can begin now.

Thank you.

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Office Hours - Spring 2023
Friday, March 31 from 1:00-2:30 p.m.
Wednesday, April 26 from 2:00-3:30 p.m.